

# Thriving as a Surgical Intern: Three Tips From the Collaboration of Surgical Education Fellows (CoSEF)

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Surgical residency is hard. In some ways, intern year may be the hardest. You've probably just moved to a different city and may be adjusting to new housing, a changed cost of living, and culture shock all while many miles away from your support system. After only a few short weeks (or days, for some) of orientation, you're thrown into what often feels like a chaotic and disorienting hospital environment. Suddenly, patients and nurses are calling you "Doctor." You are making clinical decisions that impact patients' lives while simultaneously learning how to get from your call room to the trauma bay without getting lost. In many ways, you don't feel ready, and probably never will.<sup>1</sup> We've been there. We're a group of surgical residents formally known as the Collaboration of Surgical Education Fellows (CoSEF), a multi-institutional organization of surgical education research fellows working together to foster peer mentorship, networking, and scholarly collaboration.<sup>2</sup> We've collectively reflected on our experiences as surgical interns across the country. We recognize that as you enter this new training environment, much of what you will face is outside of your immediate control. However, there are three things, albeit hard things, that you can do to foster success.

## #1: OWN YOUR PATIENTS

Even when you don't yet know the difference between an acute abdomen and gastroenteritis, you can still own your patients. The nebulous concept of patient ownership has been

defined as "the commitment that a medical provider—both individually and as part of a team of health care professionals—feels and displays in relation to the provision and coordination of care for his or her patients."<sup>3</sup> In short, take accountability for patients under your care. Know each of your patients' symptoms, medical and surgical histories, exam findings, and plans. Feel a sense of responsibility for seeing and communicating with your patients and their family members. Efficiently evaluate all patient complaints, even if the same patient has called you four times in the same day. Share and explain test results in a timely manner (making sure that you first understand them yourself!). Ensure appropriate follow up on discharge so that no patient is lost.

In learning to care for your patients, you will encounter problems that you don't know how to solve. Ask your seniors for help. Even experienced surgeons need guidance from time to time. Learning how to recognize when you are in over your head is not a sign of weakness; it is an essential skill that will make you a safe clinician. You will also encounter problems that you physically cannot solve yourself. As an intern or even as an attending physician, you cannot personally provide all of the services that a patient needs. Nurses administer medications, housekeepers provide clean bedsheets, dining services brings food, and social workers help arrange home care. Although many services might not be in your job description, you can facilitate a solution to most of your patients' problems. Serving as a patient's advocate in all aspects will enhance your education and save lives. Be the physician that you would want taking care of your friends and family.

## #2: TREAT PEOPLE LIKE PEOPLE

Growing up, we all learned the "Golden Rule": treat others how you want to be treated. Professionally, this manifests as humanism, a "thought or action in which human interests, values, and dignity predominate."<sup>4</sup> Of course, this applies to our patients. While someone may have had an uneventful appendectomy, they are more than "the appy in room 34." Laying in the bed in front of you is a person with hopes, fears, and a life outside of their disease. Rather than ignoring these things, embrace them. We often meet people on the worst day of their lives. Be sensitive to that. Show empathy. Take the time to hear their story. Listen to and address their fears or concerns. Hold their hand. Be there for them as their doctor and as a fellow human being. Remember that it is an honor and a privilege to care for others in their time of need. As best said by the American poet and activist Maya Angelou, "At the end of the day, people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel."

The Golden Rule applies to more than just your patients. You will interact with a large team of other health professionals on a daily basis (advanced practice providers, nurses, housekeepers, surgical technologists, therapists, dietitians, and medical students, to name a few). Learn their names. Ask them how

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their day is going before launching into a list of questions or requests. Listen to their concerns (doctors are not the only ones with experience or intuition...). Promptly respond to any calls for help. A 3 AM page that may seem trivial to you may not be trivial to the person who called you. You may witness people treating others unprofessionally or unkindly; speak up when you see this. At a minimum, talk to a trusted faculty member or senior resident. We are all on the same team and responsible for making our workplace safe, collaborative, and cohesive.

### #3: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Burnout is real. Nearly 40% of surgery residents report symptoms of burnout on a weekly basis, and surgery interns experience burnout at a higher rate than senior residents.<sup>5</sup> If you feel apathetic toward your work, experience increased exhaustion, or have thoughts of self-harm, talk to someone, please. Seek help. It is not your fault, and you are not alone. If you think that a co-resident is burned out, depressed, or you're worried about them for any reason, tell someone. Burnout is a systems issue which will require large-scale shifts in the way we deliver healthcare and measure success.<sup>6</sup> Advocating for change is necessary, but change is often slow. Nevertheless, we must take care of ourselves and look after our own.<sup>7</sup> Wellness is more than yoga retreats and meditation; it is personal and individualized. You must find what gives you meaning and restores your sense of wellbeing. Work these activities and behaviors into your life as best as you can. Contribute to a culture of wellness at the hospital by getting to know and supporting your co-residents while fostering an environment of kindness and compassion.

Life happens during residency. Be there for these events. You don't get any do-overs—you will never get back your best friend's wedding weekend or the first month of your newborn infant's life. Cover work shifts for your fellow residents when you can, not because they'll owe you later, but because it's the right thing to do.

Remember, you are a human and you will make mistakes, both personal and professional. Learn from them. After difficult situations such as a patient death, take time to debrief with your team or have a quiet moment alone.<sup>8</sup> Forgive yourself as easily as you forgive others. You are no "Imposter," even though you will feel like one.<sup>9</sup> Celebrate your successes as much as you

mourn your failures. If you feel like mistakes and their implications are piling up or snowballing, pause. Talk to a friend or a mentor. Do not suffer in silence. Others have been there and can support you. Listen to co-residents who are struggling. Remember that "suffering is not a competition."<sup>10</sup> Take care of each other; you're family now.

Beginning your development as a surgeon is an exciting but understandably nerve-wracking time. As you embark on this journey, we encourage you to keep these 3 principles in mind. The rest will follow.

Welcome to our family,

Your Co-Residents

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